

Joint Meeting on Lake Gardner Beach  
Lakes and Waterways Committee  
Open Space, Natural Resources and Trails Committee  
Monday March 29, 2021

Via GoTo Meeting, Recorded

Present:

**OSNRTC:** J. Sherwood (Chair), P. Rettig (Planning Board), Councilor Nick Wheeler, Councilor Adrienne Lennon, S. Thiel (Conservation Commission), J. Lopez (Conservation Agent), V. Johnson-Hall, Rich Hucksam

**Lakes and Waterways:** T. Murphy (Chair), C. Bailey (APD); M. Chapin; B. Lucas, M. Jewell, Pete Manor (City Engineer), T. Volper, Kate Ballory

Mayor Kassandra Grove

Kathy Crowley (Recreation Dept Director)

Rob Desmarais (DPW Director)

Craig Bailey (APD, Acting Chief)

## Agenda

1. Call to Order/Introductions (Respective Chairs)
2. Additions to Agenda (Respective Chairs)
3. Lake Gardner Access Options and Alternative (Desmarais)
4. Feedback from Committees Regarding Proposed Options (Committee Chairs)
5. Public Comments
6. Action Items
7. Adjourn

NOTE: Comments in the Chat were not captured by these minutes.

## Mayor Gove

Other representatives of various committees / staff involved in management of Lake Gardner Beach.

Why we are here: Overcrowding at Lake Gardner Beach. Beach use has grown rapidly over the past several years. Rapidly outgrowing its capacity and at the end we are degrading a natural resource we care deeply.

- Bathroom capacity – only 4 stalls, insufficient for number of people. Not currently in use. Issues with vandalism. Rely on porta-potties which are also vandalized.
- Too many swimmers for available life guards; issues with smoking, drinking, grilling, nudity, dog-washing, bus-loads of people. Very difficult to hire life guards.

- Beach area not large enough to accommodate number of beach goers; Cons Comm can speak to this – we are losing sandy beach area, so space is shrinking but more people coming to the beach.
- No one monitoring bathrooms & other facilities
- Management is splintered and picked up as additional duty for agencies. No one oversees all management.
  - o Recreation – lifeguards
  - o Health/LGIA – water testing
  - o Police – property damage
  - o DPW – trash
  - o LGIA – trails
  - o Watershed - dam & watershed impact (people abusing dam which threatens structural integrity)
  - o Conservation – beach.

We need to find a way to address overcrowding so don't lose this resource.

#### Rob Desmarais, Director of Public Works

1989 – Federal grant constructed bath house & parking lot. Dam is a hazard reconstructed in 2003. Bath house being used for storage. Parking lot is access point for public trails, beach, kayak launch. In 2000 opened year-round. Parking lot access controlled manually by gate on High Street. Signs offer conflicting rules.

Goal: manage number of beach goers at one time to mitigate impact on Lake Gardner. Peak times – end of June – beginning of July. Options – replace bath house to make handicap accessible (cost prohibitive); add lifeguards (difficult from cost perspective and fewer available life guards; L Gardner has reputation as difficult place to work. Expand beach (limited room to expand). Limit parking to keep numbers down.

#### Parking Options

Parking lot attendant used last year – high annual cost, requires 3 employees

Gate – high initial cost; low ROW

Kiosk – Low initial and operation cost, highest ROI; required police enforcement

What other municipalities doing

State parks – charge in / out of state fees

Andover – in / non-resident fees

Proposal: Parking Kiosk. Increase police present through Parking Enforcement Officer. Limit number of spaces through barricades. Free pass from library. Would consider annual passes. Suggested model \$1/hour for up to 8 hours starting Fri – Sun. Revenue may cover costs. Current costs – approx.. \$50,000/year

Gove: not trying to make money, more about limiting flow and traffic to control over-crowding.

#### Committee Comments

Councilor Wheeler:

What is the ideal occupancy level for the beach? In addition to addressing parking, what is long term plan for bathroom facilities?

Desmarais: no maximum capacity number. Just know that it's far too many people. I'm guessing it's less than 200. Our plan is to limit parking significantly to reduce number of spaces. Gove: last year limited cars to 35-50 and that seemed to give people plenty of space. We also have foot traffic. If we start charging, will probably increase foot traffic.

Bath house needs relatively little to replace; mostly cosmetic. Life guards said several problems with bath house – bad things happening inside, so requested to get port-o-potties to limit trouble happening in bath house. So larger presence and limiting people might solve some of this.

Kathy Crowley – Rec Director – Ideally one lifeguard/25 people.

Councilor Lennon: Funds collected for parking should go into dedicated fund for Lake Gardner.

P. Rettig

- Taking a free resource and starting to charge raised env. Equity issues; free passes at library good idea
- Good opportunity to get people more involved. One of other towns mentioned has membership of \$150; letting people buy yearly pass a good idea.
- If restrict that resource then people are going to park in nearby neighborhoods. Will have to control.

Gove: There was overflow into neighborhoods with restricted parking last year. There are no parking signs. Initial proposal is only charge for weekends so leaves it free on other days. We want to find a happy medium and see how it goes. This approach allows us that flexibility.

? I'll speak for Craig – significant overflow. Signs posted, abutting condo association had people parking there. By end of season had most of that sorted but still some issues.

Chief Bailey – Last year not too many issues; a couple where non residents parked on side streets. Other than that nothing significant.

S. Thiel – Appreciate thought about free passes but invite us to think further to make sure not equity gap in pay approach – proactive outreach to areas of low income housing; elderly

residents w/o tech access may not know about policies before get there, transportation barriers to getting to library.

Rich Hucksam – Consideration of equity as has been mentioned; what affect would plan have on trail and kayak access?

R. Desmarais: Would have to pay during peak times for parking. There are other trail access locations, such as Battis Farm. Kayak access is an issue.

V. Johnson-Hall: Echo concerns about equity and access. Invite us to consider other barriers, including kiosks – requires English fluency, tech savvy, have credit card. Library passes, but transportation barrier, also barrier for people who work long hours. Typically limited number of passes so limiting to people who know how to use library and can get there. This is a tremendous resource to Amesbury, to our low-income populations. We've all heard research this year about importance of access to green space for mental health and physical health, one of the reasons people move to communities like Amesbury. Appreciate that it's a lot of work to manage a resource like this – over-use of the Commons. Are there discussions to address the fractured management? Appointing one agency to oversee management?

M. Gove – have asked R Desmarais to re-enact Parks Division which would take leadership role on all of our park spaces.

V Johnson-Hall: City now qualifies for PARC grant, which can fund improvements at rec resources. Amesbury has 64% reimbursement rate up to max of \$400,000. Have to confirm qualification. I'm hopeful that this is just a first step in thinking about an overall mgt plan for Lake Gardner – OSRP & MVP mentioned water quality at Lake Gardner, reaching out to neighbors using lawn chemicals, recommendations to have more community engagement to encourage better water quality.

J. Sherwood – will not repeat previous comments. Already pointed out about overall mgt – OSRP recommendation is that splintered management presents a challenge for management for all of Amesbury's public parks. Recommend that this is addressed moving ahead. Proposal only gets at some of the challenges at Lake Gardner, only addressed number. But a lot of those issues wouldn't be addressed by proposal. Echo comments about access and equity issues. How many towns have a lake and beach and 2 miles of trails from their downtown? It's a great resource for the community and I'd be concerned about having any barrier to that in terms of cost. Plan proposed limiting parking – if there's a large community event – e.g., triathlon – that could achieve same goal w/o imposing cost barrier. Revenue from kiosk isn't enough to make dent in needs of the facility. I'd encourage the City to consider dropping the pay portion and focus on limiting parking spaces since that seems to be primary goal at least in terms of that goal. Town park also has bathroom facilities – are there the same issues? How is management different there to keep bathrooms maintained?

R. Desmarais: Do have problems w/bathrooms at Town Park, but less because small kids with their parents. They are considerably bigger than bathrooms at Lake Gardner.

Mayor Gove – During the summer, steadier staff presence because of rec programming at the Town Park.

#### Lakes & Waterways Committee Comments

M. Chapin: Question around resource planning and police monitoring that's proposed – how absorbed and does that fit into current resources and planning?

Chief Bailey: Parking Enforcement Office program starting this year started because of parking downtown. Hired 3 more that could potentially be going to police academy this summer; strictly parking enforcement officers spring & summer to work downtown & Lake Gardner.

M. Jewell: I read last week that Amesbury's going to receive \$1.3 million from Covid stimulus bill from federal government. Can any of that be used for Lake Gardner?

Gove: Funding can only be used in response to public health process or negative impact, water sewer and broadband infrastructure, so Lake Gardner doesn't qualify.

B. Lucas: What are numbers that are considered overcrowding? I live on the lake and kayak there. I personally have not seen horrendous overcrowding. We should know numbers – do a survey before assume that overcrowded. Also, ratio of lifeguards to swimmers. I was a lifeguard; I was lifeguarding over 25 swimmers. It would be nice if get college vs. high school kids, and effective communication tool between life guards and police. From my experience, parking lot is used for more than for beach – triathlon training, trails, boats. Costs for parking at other places – state park example you get a lot more for your money when you go to a state park than when come to Lake Gardner – our bathrooms are a wreck, beach is a wreck, not a lot of amenities. I'd like to see numbers – how many people use beach.

Mayor Gove: we'd all like to have a lot more amenities at this beach. Andover beach, e.g.. Place to launch kayaks, stands to store kayaks safely. That's why I want to generate revenue so that we can have more of a sense of ownership from this space and can expect more services. I'll ask Rob to jump in on numbers. I can say if have 100 parking spaces and 4/car, 400 people there. I know Bruce McBrien is on the line and he's shown me pictures of it looking like a circus.

Jimmy Olson with Rec Dept: Ratio of lifeguards that Kathy mentioned is from YMCA and Red Cross; also up to Board of Health. This is where lifeguards are doing training. We have multiple times in July that cars are parked inside fire zone. Residents can't get in because of parking – had to call police about that. When we had lifeguards we did have them do accounts. We do have numbers but we don't have them with us.

Kathy Crowley Amesbury Rec Director: We always had lifeguards do counts. Highest were 100-150 people. Maybe 70 people in the water at any one time. More cars than should be there and that's a lot of people for the beach, esp as Mass Public Health Guidelines is 1 lifeguard /25 people. Having people smoking drinking – that's takes eyes off of the water. In a given day about 75 people; busy day 100-150 people.

Mayor Gove: That means 3 lifeguards at a time, and we couldn't get any last year, and we were recruiting pre-COVID. No one wants to work there. And we were giving them half price for certification and still couldn't get anyone interested. So at this time we've discontinued lifeguard program.

D. Roberts: People that go for swimming, others for trails, fishing, kayaking, swimming. Maybe set aside parking areas for other uses and for a specified use of time. I have same concern about lifeguard ratio. Lifeguards need to focus on the water. Beach in Andover example is a way to focus area that lifeguard has to focus on. Fertilizer use is an entirely different conversation, but I think all of the bodies of water need to be reviewed because people are fertilizing their yards all over the place and it's bad for all the bodies of water in Amesbury. We're working on that at Lakes and Waterways Commission.

Mayor Gove: The way that people climb up on the dam and mess around with cranks and systems and we could lose water in the lake which results in failed testing. It's all interconnected. That does play into the natural resource and its role in the watershed. Maybe Pete wants to add to that?

Pete Manor: It was the first time in career that someone actually manipulated the structure, and we were losing water at Lake Gardner. You don't want people on the dam. Very difficult to keep people off of the dam. That's an after-hours problem, too; not just during the day. The police monitor that as well as they can.

T. Volper: Piggyback on what Pete talking about with dam. Last summer large groups of young kids hanging out on beach – middle school and younger – up on the dam and jumping off. It was scary. If no lifeguards coming back, is there a minimum age for unaccompanied kids at the beach and how enforce? Open water swimmers, kayakers, paddle boarders – lots of those people come before or after hours. Will Lake be open all day or 24 hours?

Mayor Gove: This proposal was to charge for an 8-hr portion of the day, so parking would be free outside of those hours. To start with just Fri – Sun, so most of week still free and available.

R. Desmarais: we were going to leave the gate open dawn – dusk.

Chief Bailey: Police should be contacted if people see others doing things they shouldn't be doing. If warrants 911, call 911.

Kate Mallory: People are making good points, but what we're talking about is overcrowding of the beach and the way we're talking about handling that is limiting parking, although parking is used for other things. Instead of limiting parking spaces, is there a way to fence off beach area so that people can have seasonal or daily passes but go through beach area and be cut off at a certain time once a certain number of people there. That could eliminate walk-ons, too.

R. Desmarais: we did look at roping off beach, but there are complications with it. Controlling access to that area requires a fence, an attendant. Yes it could be done, but infrastructure to do that is always there and don't need it all the time, so some drawbacks on that scenario. Similar to having a gate where truly limit number of people coming in, but gets complicated managing that.

K. Mallory: I grew up in Arlington with recreational lake. They fence it in and the lifeguards man it; they do rounds. People bought passes at Town Clerk's office or can buy daily pass. Few ways in and out for emergencies but only one gate to get in. It completely eliminated over crowding.

T. Murphy: 1 – The whole resource needs to be protected, which Lakes and Waterways is looking at more aggressively – expanding sense of responsibility for water quality of lake. 2 – Solution proposing may make problem more complicated. We don't have the resources or the will to make improvements to beach and we're adding more – necessity to maintain access machinery, and it won't raise enough money to cover itself. We'll end up with things that till need to be done to make beach work, but more expense to do it. Jonathan's recommendation to just start by limiting parking seems like a sensible approach, then we can see whether reducing cars reduces number of people on beach w/o complex infrastructure. If that's not enough or makes no difference, we can re-group. Seems like a small investment way to explore the next level. 3 – When are we talking about doing this?

Mayor Gove: I did not intend to extend resident-only restrictions. My preference is to put in place one of these options or something different. But I do think that we'll need to allow for distancing on the beach, which in a typical year we don't have control over. There'll need to be something done for this year.

#### Public Comments

Bruce McBrien: Living as close to the lake as I do, for 40 years, I've seen beach change a lot. Gone from cute family beach to overuse and not all that use respect it. Once you start charging it people will start valuing it. It's the only free beach for miles. This beach is one of Amesbury's assets. We should prioritize taxpayers of Amesbury. There should be a sticker system such as have for compost facility. Let's do all we can to make it better and make it a value for future residents.

Lindsay Haight: My children and I frequent town beach. I was shocked to hear determination to put a paid system into Town Beach. Issues and concerns have been addressed by a small group of residents and City departments, but have not included key stakeholders in our City, including

these 2 committees or the people who value our beach most who are the alleged hundreds of people swimming, hiking, accessing our trails throughout the year. All of the issues reflect chronic neglect by City which has been charged with maintaining and preserving resources. It never gets proper funding or staffing. So how do we expect others to value this if City has neglected it? City should lead by example before restrict access. Does not seem to be tie between concerns about behavior and litter and crowd control and charging a fee for parking. It would keep certain people away, but that's assuming everyone who pays wouldn't misuse beach. Cost/benefit doesn't address how fee-based solution will exclude many people in a City where more than 1 in 10 people – pre-COVID - rely on food assistance programs to eat. Also doesn't take into consideration social and emotional repercussions if people can't take their children to the beach. There are much better ways to address this situation. I have never been witnessed issues mentioned at beach myself, nor has anyone ever approached us at the beach to invite me to talk about problems. This process should not proceed any further without plan for stakeholder involvement. Let's see what happens when Town starts investing in the beach. It's trashy – condition of the beach is trashy. There are other places I can pay to go and get more for my money. The overcrowding speaks to how valuable this is for people.

Councilor Steve Stanganelli – [Comments were read into the record] A common resource should be available to all; we should commit resources to maintenance. Improvements should be addressed by PARC grant program. If we push this forward we'll push more traffic to neighborhoods which will be more costly as deal with neighbor issues. Will we have parking permits for residents? We need to have some kind of monitoring on site even if no lifeguards. Access proposed is not fair to kayakers, swimmers, trail users considering the taxes they pay to the City.

Melissa Arend, 60 High St: I use the lake almost every day. This is an issue near and dear ot my heart. My initial reaction were worried about not having a lot of clarity on goals and how achieve by this proposal. There are lots of different goals – have more money for managing beach, maybe recruit more lifeguards, to reduce trash, pressure. There are different policy issues that could be considered if reducing capacity is main goal. Would be nice to have a more public process for discussing those goals. What types of users there, who's using beach, how much would people be willing to pay, how much revenue could be generated? That would help Town figure out what could be achieved in the long run. If this needs to happen for this upcoming season, start by reducing parking lot size, which doesn't result in big investment. Best short run option.

Frank Czar: Reiterate what Bruce McBrien said. Want people most invested in beach ot have most access to it. Problem with trouble that have during peak season is lots of people who aren't invested in the beach itself. It's a low-cost option to just include the compost sticker into a beach and compost sticker or some combination and at least limit peak hours to the people that use the beach the most which is Amesbury residents.

Rebecca Blanchette: We just moved to Amesbury 2 years ago. Numbers don't add up. Profit would be \$4,000 but kiosk is almost \$11,000 with annual cost of \$1800. Is that over life of it?

You've cut profit in half already. No potential revenue for 3-4 years. Doesn't put a dent into beach expenses. Now adding parking attendant. I don't think numbers add up.

Chris Blanchette: Limiting parking will drive more cars into neighborhoods.

Steve Ridgley, 8 Lion's Court, Amesbury resident 44 years. Problem at beach is not one of overcrowding in my experience except for a few days of the year, which planning could address independent of an overarching plan regarding limiting access. The beach should not pay for itself; we should invest in it. We want to have a pleasant, safe experience for people there and we need to invest in that. Start by getting rid of so-called overcrowding by returning beach to original size. Beach has been squeezed to half original size as vegetation has grown in. Swimming area last year was compressed. Let's invest money in the beach to make it a place people want to be. We don't look to the police and fire department to pay for itself. If we pay lifeguards enough money you can get people in to do the job.

Any additional comments from OSNRT?

N. Wheeler: Lifeguard program - \$32K / year and discontinued. Where was \$32K reallocated to? We could potentially be spending that on other improvements to the beach. Is there an overarching agency in charge of managing Lake Gardner? Does City Council make rules, or does Parks & Rec have that authority? How does parking restructuring dovetail with existing Lake Gardner Management Plan? 1989 Federal Grant – my understanding is we don't have ability to make beach residents-only because of grant. Has KP Law reviewed any of that documentation to determine legal ramifications with this proposal if we could make resident parking cheaper or free?

Kathy Crowley: funding for lifeguards came out of Amesbury Rec Dept fees. All of our programs are free, fees pay for our salaries and jobs. We were paying for lifeguards as well out of our fees. Our fees were nonexistent with COVID. \$35K is for ideal set up for lifeguards and a beach director, which would take care of a lot of the issues that we would be calling police for. We have beach directors before. They can do more than regular lifeguards.

Mayor Gove: In my opinion, rules need to be combined into one set and codified and there needs to be someone designated for enforcement and repercussions for not following the rules in that ordinance.

Kathy Crowley: Getting college kids is very difficult.

R. Desmarais: Federal grant doesn't prevent from charging, just prevents us from preferential treatment for Amesbury residents.

N. Wheeler: Avg annual maintenance is about \$48K. Vast majority is lifeguards and beach director which is all from Parks & Rec. So, City spending less than \$16K/year on beach, which is less than \$1/capita annually. We could look at spending more money to improve the resources. We should be also going for grants.

Mayor Gove: This wasn't meant to be in place of. Do we go ahead and start investing more and then continue to let people destroy it, or do it in complement with each other so that people feel like they get what they're paying for. How do we all want to approach it?

B. Lucas: My late husband felt that no one should be charged for lake; it should be upgraded and taken care of.

Action item:

Mayor Gove: We need to make a plan for this season. My call to all of you is to send us your ideas. You can email me directly [govek@amesburyma.gov](mailto:govek@amesburyma.gov). I want this to be an open process. It is a resource are all grateful for and want it to remain available and in good condition. So please send your feedback to me and we'll see what we can do.

Addenda – Public Comment from GoToMeeting chat:

7:27 PM

Bruce McBrien - LGIA to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT - Bruce McBrien - 80 High Street

7:27 PM

ljhai to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT - Lyndsey Haight, 2 Pine St.

7:51 PM

Steve Stanganelli to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT: Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Avenue: A common resource should be available to all. Our problem is no commitment to budgeting for maintenance and capital improvement. Given the amount of money paid in taxes - directly and indirectly - on real estate, auto excise, and meals, we should commit resources for this - better if reserved through a DIF (District Improvement Funding) program if we aren't going to have the discipline to do this through our operating and capital improvement budgets.

7:54 PM

Steve Stanganelli to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT: Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Ave: Since the dam is critical water infrastructure, I believe that we should be able to use even a small portion to repair the dam and put in place deterrents and physical security for the dam and wall. The other improvements to the area can best be addressed through the PARC grant program referenced earlier by Vanessa Johnson-Hall of OSNRT.

8:03 PM

mel webster to Everyone

Public Comment: while I know there are signs that state swim at your own risk, I don't think it's good policy for the city to offer a beach/swimming facility with zero lifeguards.

8:06 PM

Steve Stanganelli to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT: Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Ave.: Use the COVID money for water infrastructure security to include CCTV with police monitoring.

8:16 PM

Bruce McBrien - LGIA to Everyone

Public comment: Bruce McBrien, 80 High Street; There was at one point a discussion about sticker access for residents, with guest access available...is that still an option under consideration?

8:17 PM

Melissa Errend to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT: Melissa Errend, 60 High Street. I agree limiting parking first without kiosk seems like it would potentially limit without investing in a particular fee system, leaves room for other fee or permit systems later. I am not sure what timeline is, but it would be great to survey people to see what their willingness to pay for different options would be, would give you a better idea on how to achieve your capacity goals.

8:19 PM

Frank Czar to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT: Frank Czar 10 Sanborn Ter. I would like to second Bruce's adding Beach Parking to the Compost sticker Sticker program - it's an existing system and would prioritize access to residents.

8:21 PM

Steve Stanganelli to Everyone

PUBLIC COMMENT: Steve Stanganelli, 12 Amidon Avenue: Is it at all possible to reassign the School Resource Officers and any Reserve Officers to monitor the beach during the summer? There is critical water infrastructure there and without monitoring there will likely be ongoing safety issues to people and property.

8:22 PM

mel webster to Everyone

Public Comment: if you have no one on site monitoring and regulating activity at the beach, then you will never control or regulate behavior at the beach.

8:45 PM

Bruce McBrien - LGIA to Everyone

Public Comment: Bruce McBrien, 80 High Street; Amesbury lacks enforceable "dawn to dusk" rules...is that something to be considered by City Hall?

OSNRT: Motion to adjourn N. Wheeler, 2<sup>nd</sup> V. Johnson-Hall. Unanimously approved.  
Lakes & Waterways Motion to adjourn by B. Lucas. 2<sup>nd</sup> Kate. Unanimously approved.